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ABSTRACT

The English-only movement is about more than language; underlying it is bigotry against non-White, non-English-speaking immigrants. The term "Hispanic" is itself a Census Bureau creation which ignores the cultural and linguistic differences between such groups as the Mexican, Cuban, and Nicaraguan immigrants. The argument that a single language unites the United States ignores the major role of, for example, the German language and culture early in American history. Proposals calling for a constitutional amendment to name English the official language of the United States suggest punishment although it is doubtful that those concerned with the immigrant population intend to be punitive. The English-only movement reaffirms an ethnocentric and xenophobic past that Americans would like to tell themselves they have transcended. (SG)

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English Si, Only No

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At the 100th Congress, last year's, six English Language Amendments were introduced--Senate Joint Resolution 13 and House Resolutions 13, 33, 83, and 656. Support in the Senate was down to five senators, all Republican (Symms, Cochran, Thurmond, Garn, and Helms, with Hatch having withdrawn his support for the resolution and Zorinsky having died on March 1987, his replacement not supporting the resolution). In the House there were seventy-two co-sponsors on English-language legislation. There were fifty the previous congress.

Congressional support to the bill first introduced by S.I. Hayakawa on April 27, 1981 does not seem threatening. But there is the matter of constituency. We are told by various newspaper surveys that America, generally, supports English-only. Seventeen states now have English-only statutes. That's half of what would be necessary for a constitutional conference. Congressmen, we would have to assume, would support their constituencies, no matter what their personal inclinations concerning an English Language Amendment. That makes for seventeen states out of a necessary thirty-three. The last three--Florida, Colorado, and Arizona--decided in favor of English-only even after John Tanton's racism had been made public--after Tanton, the founder of U.S. English, the

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lobbying organization for EIA, had been exposed as having had written a memo which announced that America is in potential danger of being overrun by fast-breeding, poverty-stricken, non-English-speaking, non-Whites, a memo which declared that America is in potential danger of being overrun by these Spanish-speaking Catholics, a religious organization that does not respect the traditional division of Church and State. The last three states passed English-Only statutes even after public figures like Walter Cronkite had resigned from U.S. English, after Linda Chavez, the Hispanic president of U.S. English, had resigned. Three states, including Arizona, my present home state, passed English-only resolutions despite the most blatant bigotry. How is that? Is bigotry so rampant in America today? Is bigotry so blatant? Are so many people in this country, at this time, willing to assert their bigotry?

I would like to believe this isn't the case. I would bet that Tanton tends to be seen as an aberration, the perversion possible but not the norm. I would bet there are many who believe that those of us who say English-Only legislation is a racial or ethnic matter figure we are just given to typical minority overreaction, that we don't understand that <u>our</u> welfare, the welfare of Hispanics, as well as the nation's welfare, rests on our ability to communicate.

So who wouldn't realize that a nation needs a common language, that English is that language here? Who wouldn't know that though a command of English might not be a guarantee of power, its lack pretty well guarantees powerlessness. This is a secret to no one.

The problem is that there is more than language involved in an English-only mandate. We have a history of feeling threatened by other languages. We have a history of rash judgment and expensive apologies.

In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt appointed an Immigration Commission to study what was being perceived of as an immigration problem. By 1911 the Commission issued a forty-two volume report. Its findings were that the new immigrants, Eastern and Southern Europeans, were inherently inferior to old immigrants. The commission cited a noted anthropologist, Madison Grant, who wrote,

> The new immigration contained a large and increasing number of the weak, the broken, and the mentally crippled of all races drawn from the lowest stratum of the Mediterranean basin and the Balkans, together with hordes of the wretched, submerged populations of the Polish ghettoes. Our jails, insane asylums, and almshouses are filled with human flotsam and the whole tone of American life, social, moral, and political,

> has been lowered and vulgarized by them. (in Estrada, Garcia, Macias, and Maldonado 115)

Italians are still "ethnic." We still tell Polish jokes.

As for Mexicans, Arizona's bid for statehood at the turn of the century had been denied several times on the basis of its indigenous Mexican population. The denials referred to the Mexican's "mongrel racial character"--and his inability to speak English. Despite kind gestures from the governor of Arizona after the recent passing of language legislation, despite Tucson's assertion of respect for its linguistic diversity, Arizona is now on record with the most restrictive language policy of the fifty states, the most restrictive of the seventeen states with delimiting language laws on their books.

In 1924, America closed the doors to free immigration from Europe. The door was always closed to Asians. Mexicans were still allowed in--to work the farms, railroads, and mines. In 1928, congressional hearings on Western Hemisphere immigration tried closing the doors on the not-to-be-citizened Mexican. Mexicans had become less desirable than the "New Immigrants":

> Their minds run to nothing higher than animal functions--eat, sleep, and sexual debauchery. In every huddle of Mexican shacks one meets the same idleness, hordes of hungry dogs, and filthy children with faces plastered with flies, disease, lice, human filth,

stench, promiscuous fornication, bastardly, lounging, apathetic peons and lazy squaws, beans and dried fruit, liquor, general squalor, and envy and hatred of the gringo. These people sleep by day and prowl by night like coyotes, stealing anything they can get their hands on, no matter how useless to them it may be. Nothing left outside is safe unless padlocked or chained down. Yet there are Americans clamoring for more of these human swine to be brought over from Mexico. (Estrada, et al. 116)

The clamorers won out. More of these "human swine" were allowed in. Profit won out over prejudice.

But when the profits ran out, the Mexicans were kicked out. With the Great Depression, the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who found need for relief were directed to "Mexican Bureaus." The Bureaus' job was to repatriate Mexicans--without regard to citizenship. In 1933 a Los Angeles eyewitness to the repatriation process expressed the sentiments of those in both the West and the Southwest.

> The repatriation programme is regarded locally as a piece of consummate statecraft. The average per family cost of executing it is $71.14, including food and transportation. It cost one Los Angeles County $77,249.29 to repatriate one shipment of 6,024. It would have cost $424,933.70 to provide this number with

> such charitable assistance as they would have been entitled to had they remained--a savings of $347,468.40. (Estrada, et al. 118; emphasis added)

From 1929-1934 the number of repatriated and expatriated Mexicans exceeded 400,000. I say "expatriated" because approximately half were native to the United States, a good number not only American but also Anglicized. Some would have been natives at the time America had won and purchased the territories of the West and the Southwest from Mexico. Their children and grandchildren would have attended American schools.

"But it's English which unites us."

There are many whose concern really is with providing everyone equal access to America's bounties. (One would think there were no poor, excluded, monolingual, English-speaking Anglos in America.) Poverty and exclusion are seen as the exclusive problem of the minority or the immigrant--the ruddy-skinned immigrant. (The fair-skinned Western and Northern European immigrant quietly acquiesced, we are told.) Here's former Senator Huddleston:

> For over 200 years, the United States has enjoyed the blessing of one primary language that is spoken and understood by most of its citizens. The previous unquestioned acceptance of the language by immigrants

> from every linguistic and cultural background has enabled us to come together and prosper as one people. (English Language Amendment, 1984 15)

History tells a different tale. Let's put aside the hundreds of Indian languages that were here already; let's put aside the Dutch and Swedish of New York and Delaware, the reasons for a tunnel named "Holland" or a university named "Rutgers." Let's put aside the French of Louisiana, officially bilingual to this day. Let's skip that there are over 130 languages spoken in America to this day. Let's even--for the moment--put aside a history of two-thirds of what we now consider the United States as having once been predominately Spanish speaking, more a threat to English primacy then than it could ever be now. Let's look, rather, to the Pennsylvania Dutch--really Deutsche. You've heard what Senator Huddleston had to say. And I mentioned what Tanton has said. Now hear Ben Franklin. The year is 1751. He asks,

> Why should the Palatine Boors [remember Mexican Swine? Before, it was German Boors] be suffered to swarm onto our Settlements and, by herding together, establish their Language and Manners, to the Exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them? (qtd. in Weaver, 1970, p. 57)

The Germans who were in America during the Revolutionary-War era were apparently not in a hurry to learn English. They petitioned Congress in 1795 for the United States to publish its laws in German as well as in English. Their petition, the petition of the Virginia delegation, made it through committee, falling to defeat by only one vote. But despite this minor defeat, German remained America's semi-official second language for years. In the years between 1830 and 1890 4.5 million more Germans came to the United States, evidently determined not to assimilate. Seven years after the first wave, 1837, Pennsylvania legislated that the public schools be conducted in English and German--legislated that German would have equal status with English. By 1840 Ohio's public schools were bilingual German-English. Some schools--public schools--in Minnesota, Maryland, and Indiana were exclusively German (Fallows 379). Hispanics have not been so bold. The German-English schools did not completely die for nearly a century: not until the first world war. America's German-Americans knew they had to Americanize, given a war with Germany.

They Americanized and that was the end of it. Race was not a factor. A war later, Japanese-Americans got penned up, but not German-Americans. We forget America's bilingual history--more bilingual than Canada's--because its earlier linguistic history was not biracial.

After the first world war bilingual education gave way to something like current teachings of English as a Second Language. Mexican-Americans, along with other minorities, became part of a nationwide push at Americanizing the "immigrant," a push with remarkable similarities to the present day. The California Commission on Immigration and Housing outwardly declared its endorsement of "Americanization propaganda" (Fallows 378; my emphasis). The propaganda campaign evidently worked, given the now-common belief that we have always been English only.

During the campaign, those who were being compelled to Americanize were not only Mexicans but the "new immigrants"--the Italians, Yugoslavs, Poles, Rumanians--those who were living in ghettoes, those the acclaimed anthropologist found to be inherently inferior, those who were, according to public perception, according to newspapers, refusing to learn English (Hakuta). Already forgotten was the bona-fide, documented, legislated German refusal. Intensive English instruction was mandated and instituted. Penalties were imposed on those who spoke other languages. Successful learning of English was gauged by students' abilities to speak like the Anglo middle class. The success of these programs was measured by standardized achievement tests and IQ tests. These and other criteria determined students' high-school curricula, with racial minorities and immigrants finding their ways into trade-oriented schools rather than college preparatory schools.

The laws came in the 1920s. In the 1950s I found myself in the voc-tech high school, slotted for a trade, despite my being an "A" student, a Merriam-Webster spelling-bee champ, a boy who preferred reading (in English) to baseball, quite nearly monolingual in English by eighth-grade graduation.

By the 1930s English oral proficiency had become a precondition for immigration. English literacy had become a precondition for voting, a requirement also aimed at Southern Blacks--who were neither immigrants nor bilingual.

We hear that today there are many Spanish-speaking ghettoes, that the difference between the "new immigrants" of the twenties and the Hispanics of today is a matter of numbers. This is so. But it reflects an earlier wave of assimilation. The Arawak and Boricua languages of Puerto Ricans, the native Indian tongues of Cubans, of the various peoples of Central and South America, of Mexico, were erased by the Spaniards during their four centuries of rule over Mexico and Latin America.

"Hispanic" is a convenience created by the Census Bureau. Mexican, Cuban, and Nicaraguan immigrants do have some cultural and linguistic similarities, but they also differ. Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans are not even immigrants, a good number of us monolingual in English yet not assimilated in the usual sense. Different Hispanic groups have even held deep prejudices against one another.

"Somos blancos," descended from Spain, Mami would say. Mexicans "son indios," Dad would say. They didn't see the india in mi abuela's features. They didn't see the West African in my sister. Like Anglos in America today, Mami and Dad confused race and language.

But these prejudices seem to be fading as we become regarded as this one thing, the Hispanic. It is no accident that the only non-border state I am aware of which has recently passed an official language proposition is Colorado. Colorado has a mixed Puerto Rican and Mexican population. Adolf Coors had attracted Puerto Ricans, Grapes of Wrath Style, when he needed cheap labor.

The numbers of Spanish-speaking ghettoes are great. The numbers resistant to English-learning are negligible. Ninety-eight percent of Hispanics responding to a national survey conducted in 1985 believed it essential for their children to learn to read and write "perfect" English (Hakuta). How could they believe otherwise?

English is, for the present time, the language of the globe. I think of a PBS show on The Story of English in which it was pointed out that an Air Italia commercial jet, flying over Italian air-space on a local flight, piloted by Italians, must nevertheless speak in English when communicating with ground control. If a student in Napoli or Beijing or Liberia or Mexico City recognizes the need for English, surely the American or would-be American recognizes the need.

How does the language of the globe become threatened by we poor fast-breeders? We aren't likely to outnumber East Indians or Chinese. Why isn't theirs the international language? The lingua franca is not determined by population numbers. If more Hispanics were the owners of multinational corporations, or even CEOs, I'd understand the fear.

It is true that the English language provides unity. But it is hardly the panacea English-only suggests. There remains basic ethnocentrism. Here's an example. Our Secretary of Education is Lauro Cavazos. I like him. Yet the conditions of his appointment smacked of tokenism, coming, as it did, within days of George Bush's pledge to have an Hispanic in his cabinet if he were elected president. Still, the Hispanic community and others declared how nice it was to finally see an Hispanic in high office. But here are some questions. Why must we suspect Cavazos' appointment as tokenism? Why is he more token than qualified? Cavazos is a sixth-generation Texan and the president of a university. Six generations: he's not an immigrant. A university president: that's not one of those radical separatists Hayakawa warns the nation against. Cavazos couldn't be more assimilated. He doesn't even sport the Indian-like features of stereotypical Mexicans. He has met all the conditions to becoming an assimilated American, even genetic preconditions. Yet the public still sees a hyphenated American.

It's been more than a half century since the last English-only movement. We are again attempting essentially the same policies for essentially the same reasons, racial reasons. Non-English speakers must learn English, we all know. No one denies it. But a constitutional amendment suggests punishment. The punishment would be levied almost exclusively at particular groups of people--as it has in the past. I doubt that those who are concerned with the welfare of a Spanish-speaking minority or immigrant intend to be punitive. Yet Official English reaffirms an ethnocentric and xenophobic past we would like to tell ourselves and the world we have transcended.

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